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PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS IN MILITARY OPERATIONS OTHER THAN
WAR
Implications for the Joint Task Force Commander

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, by the Department of the Navy, or by the Department of Defense.

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15. Abstract: Future JTF Commanders are faced with a variety of complex issues in commanding Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). These external demands must not detract from the commander's responsibility to protect the mental military readiness of the Armed Forces under his command. As demonstrated in past MOOTWs, each of the principles of MOOTW all has implications for unique psychological stress imposed on deployed troops and the resulting role of the JTF commander in preventing and countering this stress. New leadership styles and techniques are called for in the future JTF commander to preserve the psychological readiness of his troops to perform in MOOTW scenarios.			
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Psychological Stress in Military Operations Other Than War Implications for the Joint Task Force Commander

Introduction

Post-Cold War experience indicates that deployment of the Armed Forces for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) will be increasingly more likely than deployment for more traditional conventional combat. With this relatively recent realization, military education and training programs are being revamped to ensure that future joint task force (JTF) commanders are prepared to command these operations. The MOOTW poses daunting problems. Leaders could be required to fulfill an unfamiliar and unclear mission, with unknown partners and enemies, in a strange, dynamic cultural environment, with unfamiliar geography and surrounded by human misery and corruption. Such a personal and professional external challenge could easily overwhelm the JTF Commander, consuming his thought process and directing his total attention to a variety of problems external to his military unit. However, at the same time as these substantial external challenges, the commander faces another immense challenge critical to his unit's military readiness. This is his responsibility to preserve the psychological readiness of the troops under his command. Fragile in any deployed situation, the mental well being of the armed forces are particularly susceptible to the vast uncertainties of MOOTW.

Psychological Stress Imposed by MOOTW

In past conventional conflicts, soldiers fought their war and then were discharged to their civilian lives along with any psychological disorders that they may have developed as a result of their military service.¹ Some old school veterans and military planners question why today's service members need to be provided any other special

treatment. After all, doesn't a MOOTW, as an operation other than conventional war, pose less danger of affecting the psyche of the soldier than the large, bloody battles of past world and regional conflicts?

The difference between the psychological disorders experienced by soldiers in past conventional conflicts and today's MOOTW operations lies in the duration and intensity of the psychological stressors². Experience to date with MOOTW deployments indicates that these operations are characterized less by intense traumatic events producing major psychiatric disorders. While MOOTWs may include brief periods of trauma and acute stress, they seem to more typically impose chronic mild to moderate stress on the troops.³

Military psychiatrists have determined that all military intervention operations since 1989 -- combat, peacekeeping, humanitarian and government support -- have imposed stress, with the MOOTW deployments imposing psychological stresses distinct from those of traditional military operations.

Until recently, future commanders have had limited experience and little training in the non-military disciplines needed to carry out MOOTW missions. In fact, many members of the armed forces are uncomfortable with this new role and unsure of "why the military has been given duties it was never created or trained to perform."⁴ The commander himself may balk at the idea of focusing his attention on the preservation of his troops' mental stamina. This is especially true in light of what has been a pervasive belief in the military that exhibiting a need for psychological help could be a detriment to one's career progression.⁵ However, if the joint commander does not learn to prevent any detrimental psychological effects of a deployment, he risks exacerbating the reluctance of

his troops to self diagnose any emerging psychological misgivings. Absent early intervention, deployment induced stress could ultimately undermine the Armed Forces military capabilities with doubt, confusion, and disgust.

Principles of MOOTW – Implications for Stress Factors

Joint Pub 3-07, on Military Operations Other Than War establishes the doctrine for MOOTW as another dimension to the principles of war in general. Each MOOTW-specific principle has implications for the mental health of the deployed troops and the role of the joint task force commander in preserving the psychiatric well being of his charges:⁶

Objective

Direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective⁷

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: MOOTWs often have ambiguous, changeable objectives. This can make it difficult for soldiers to understand the values underlying a campaign – and to recognize any value of their own contributions.⁸ Many deployed troops may have been trained with special skills to participate in a conventional armed conflict. Being deployed overseas and being told to direct their efforts towards a far different objective -- for instance, protecting food distribution, or maintaining order in a refugee camp – can be mentally frustrating. The soldiers may actually resent the mission, even more so in the often austere conditions of such a deployment.

Research on the Somalia MOOTW indicates that one of the principal stress factors of the deployed troops was the ambiguous mission.⁹ The service members were justified in this discomfort. What began as a mission to assure the security of the relief workers and protect the food deliveries wound up costing more U.S. lives than in

Panama, and more casualties per capita than the Persian Gulf War. Other sources of stress for the U.S. troops in Somalia were their beliefs that their superiors did not trust them and their sense that they were failing to do anything significant for the Somalis¹⁰.

In Operation Uphold Democracy, the MOOTW deployment to Haiti, many soldiers perceived the mission to be pointless; resulting in disillusionment with the U.S. military's efforts to improve the lives of the Haitians. This created another frustrating stress factor for deployed service members.

Implications for JTF Commander: The commander may be no less frustrated than his troops with the mission of the MOOTW. However, regardless of his view of the value of the mission, his responsibility for maintaining mental readiness calls for the Commander to focus on how to obtain a clear definition of his mission objectives from his superiors and how to communicate this mission to his troops. The commander needs to ensure that his troops are completely aware of this objective and the worth of their contribution to this objective—hence the value of the face to face communication with the troops recommended in the recent Combat Stress Control directive.

In studying Somalia, it has been determined that the cumulative effect of the soldiers' perceived deficiencies in trust and information was a sense of failure and disillusionment. However, the consensus in post-Somalia analysis is that the soldiers had not failed. They had maintained their poise and discipline and assured relief of the famine in most of the country. Their lack of accurate feedback on their performance while deployed led to their decreased morale. If not prevented by clear communication and feedback from the commanders of future MOOTWs, this problem could extend to erosion in cohesion and decrement to the psychological readiness of the troops.¹¹

In Haiti, the commanders apparently made little effort to convince their troops that their contributions were valuable. In fact, many soldiers complained that they were not trusted and were treated like children. The Haitian operation has lead psychiatrists to speculate that most stress is avoidable if commanders implement basic precepts of leadership – taking care of the troops, and making sure that their time, energy and abilities are used productively; and telling the troops the whole truth early and often. In addition, when the leader does not know the entire truth about the nature of or reasons for the mission, psychiatrists recommend that he say so.¹²

In the likely event that the MOOTW mission changes or evolves, the joint commander needs to immediately convey the clarification to his troops, so that mentally, they can adjust to focus all of their actions and contributions to the re-defined mission. The pitfall with the “Objective” dimension of MOOTW is a joint commander’s tendency to focus on achieving mission success and his upward focus on proving himself to his superiors. However, he will never achieve mission success if he ignores the mental frustrations created in his troops by not keeping them informed of the mission objective.

One is reminded of the scene in Saving Private Ryan where the Tom Hanks character, as the leader of the group sent to find Private Ryan, is continually subjected to the complaints of his troops about the mission that they have been directed to perform. After a particularly intense complaint session, a member of the platoon asks Tom Hanks why he doesn’t gripe about the worthlessness of the mission? Tom Hanks’ reply was, “I gripe up. I don’t gripe down.” The joint commander would do well to follow this advice in his role in future MOOTW missions.¹³

Unity of Effort

Need to ensure that all means are directed to a common purpose¹⁴

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: The U.S. military finds it difficult enough to ensure jointness and unity of effort between members of different Services deployed for a particular mission. The MOOTW dimension exacerbates this problem by placing U.S. troops side by side with culturally and politically diverse participants, in what is sometimes an ill-defined command structure. Oftentimes, there are conflicts within multinational forces. Prejudices and parochialism are bound to surface – both collectively and individually – creating further discomfort if not racial, cultural or social tension. All of these added tensions can divert the U.S. service member from his focus on and readiness to perform the combined mission.

Implications for JTF Commander: While many commanders never envisioned one of their biggest challenges to be preserving unit cohesion, this is exactly the challenge that a MOOTW presents. Military psychiatrists recommend leadership behavior that fosters the development of cohesion – “honesty and trust across ranks, respect down as well as up the line, empowerment of subordinates, technical competence, sharing of hardships, and attention to the personal, professional, and familial welfare of one’s troops”¹⁵.

In recognition of the unique nature of the psychological stress created by MOOTWs, Defense health officials, promulgated a Directive dealing with Combat Stress Control on February 23, 1999.¹⁶ This directive is innovative in its implications for senior leadership styles by establishing in policy the requirement for preventive combat stress

courses to emphasize the need for “frequent communication (in person) with troops.”

This recommendation is aimed at improved unit moral and cohesion.

The new Directive also recommends that military units or individual service members experiencing combat stress reactions be treated within the unit or as close to the member’s unit as possible to preserve just such unity of effort. Military psychiatrists have determined that rapid evacuation and separation of individuals suffering from combat stress from his or her military unit greatly increases the risk of subsequent, serious, long-term social and psychiatric complications.¹⁷

In describing his experiences as the Director of Operations with the multinational force in Somalia, General Anthony Zinni encourages the military participants in future MOOTWs to talk to people, make contacts, to create relationships, all in pursuit of unity of effort – politically, culturally, and militarily. With this knowledge and comfort and goal of “not making any enemies”, tensions will be reduced and unity of effort improved through improved communications.¹⁸

Security

Preventing hostile factions from acquiring a military, political, or informational advantage¹⁹

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: Some MOOTW operations, by their slow-moving, sometimes deceptively non-military, nature have the potential to create intense boredom in certain service members – for instance those trained or previously deployed for conventional combat. This boredom could affect the service member’s mental state by reducing his alertness and his resulting mental readiness to fight. The presence of non-government organizations and culturally unfamiliar populations could discourage the

U.S. service member from actively protecting such “friendlies” in the event of a sudden attack or switch to a combat mode. In addition, an ill-defined mission may not render the service member even capable of distinguishing between that population that he should protect. This confusion could result in extreme stress if the spectrum of conflict were to change quickly from peacekeeping to armed conflict, easily compromising the security of the mission.

In the other extreme from boredom, soldiers deployed to Somalia were subjected to hostile words and gestures from mobs of Somalis at close quarters – even when these soldiers were not involved in conflict.²⁰ Depending on the mental stability of the service members, the incidences could easily present an opportunity for hostile factions to take advantage of the American soldiers by provoking them into combat.

Implications for JTF Commander: To a large extent the stress imposed by the security aspect of MOOTW can be solved by adhering to General Zinni’s recommendation that the U.S. military should try hard not to make enemies.²¹

Other advice to the JTF Commander on maintaining security can be found in “lessons learned” in Somalia – that a balance be “struck between the requirement for restraint and the security of the force.” This advice spills over to the Rules of Engagement (ROE) for the MOOTW. In recognition of the effect of competing mental demands on his troops, the commander must keep in mind how these ROE might be applied in tense situations by warfighters rather than lawyers.”²²

Restraint

Apply appropriate military capability prudently. (In a MOOTW, Rules of Engagement (ROE) are generally more restrictive, detailed, and sensitive to political concerns than in full scale conventional war.)²³

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: Service members should understand the ROE of any deployment. This is especially true in a MOOTW during which service members may be using adapted or completely new skills to achieve what may be nebulous political objectives such as maintaining peace or protecting food distribution. Unclear rules of engagement and mission purpose, coupled with long periods of inactivity and frustrated aggression, introduce unique stressors.²⁴ In a MOOTW, the actual detail and restraint required in the ROE could create smoldering tensions and resentments in the service member already disgusted with the nature of the deployment to begin with. Unstable service members can be walking mental time bombs with the potential to escalate the conflict by exceeding the prescribed ROE at any provocation. By doing so, the individual service member could inadvertently destroy the success of the entire MOOTW mission or unnecessarily escalate the conflict for all the belligerents, subjecting the mission to a characteristic of all complex humanitarian emergencies – “the law of unintended consequences.”²⁵

One recent finding of military researchers was that a particular stressor of peacekeeping missions is the lack of an opportunity to release aggression. While soldiers involved in conventional conflict have opportunities to release aggression, MOOTW participants must restrain this aggression. It was this frustrated aggression and need for restraint that is believed to have played a role in the early high rate of psychiatric

problems of US troops in Haiti. Some speculate that the last minute change of the Haitian mission from combat to peacekeeping contributed to the difficulties some of the troops had in adjusting to the mission.²⁶

The need for the soldiers of tomorrow's MOOTW deployment to exercise psychological restraint is specified in Joint Pub 3-07.3. This doctrinal prescription for future peacekeepers calls for "a professional demeanor that stresses quiet diplomacy and reasoning" rather than "arrogance, anger, disdain, coercion or sarcasm. Personnel must be able to cope positively when each side seeks to press its position and then reacts vocally when stopped." However, this psychological restraint may be easier described in a Joint Pub than achieved in the field when a soldier trained to "take that hill" at any cost is asked to cope positively with quiet diplomacy and reasoning.

Implications for JTF Commander: The Joint Task Force Commander must exercise the same restraint. In addition, he must be attuned to the individual and collective frustrations of the troops under his command in performing achieving such restraint. He must monitor any demonstrated mental effect of such frustrations – to control combat stress.

Recognizing how difficult this restraint will be during an actual deployment, the February 1999 Directive on Combat Stress Control requires senior officers to include plans for combat stress control in operational planning for joint operations, both in wargaming and on the battlefield. Leaders are also now required to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms of combat stress reaction in their units and in themselves.²⁷

The recent requirement that mental health stress reduction teams conduct a post-crisis debriefing, with participation of the commander, has already proved valuable.

Following the ground war in Iraq, mental health personnel conducted these debriefings and taught the commanders how to recognize and deal with “cease-fire letdown”, a reaction to the decrease in tension after combat – when some soldiers engage in daredevil behavior. The quick transition from peace operations to hostilities and vice versa and the related change in psychological requirements from restraint to use of force (and back again to restraint) could also be a characteristic of future MOOTWs with the potential to impose unique psychological stresses.

Perseverance

Measured, patient, resolute and persistent application of military capability in support of strategic aims²⁸

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: The reality of a long deployment in uncomfortable and unfamiliar conditions makes patience and persistence elusive. A study of Swedish soldiers serving on a UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon indicated that significant sources of stress were inactivity, homesickness, and the need for solitude. During Desert Storm, while not a MOOTW or a protracted operation by any means, troops did suffer from the stress imposed by having to persevere in the harsh environment, with the persistent fear that the Iraqis would use chemical weapons.²⁹ This is certainly a potential stress factor in future MOOTWs – the need to persevere in light of the fear that the enemy or an asymmetric terrorist will actually employ chemical or biological weapons.

As for MOOTW-specific perseverance, the Uphold Democracy operation in Haiti resulted in a sense on the part of the troops that the deployment was prolonged excessively. In addition, the general discomfort of the troops made perseverance

difficult. Eighty-four percent of soldiers surveyed two months into the mission complained about poor sanitation to include insufficient number of toilets, toilets that were rarely emptied, foul water, and no showers. Seventy-four percent of the soldiers worried about contracting life-threatening diseases. The food was viewed as monotonous and inadequate. The perception by some was that the commanders were living in much greater, air-conditioned comfort.³⁰

Implications for JTF Commander: The joint commander is responsible for minimizing his troops' discomforts while acknowledging those that they must all endure. Soldiers can live in discomfort and adapt to unfamiliar missions, and will even perform jobs not appropriate to their training, if the vertical cohesion is maintained – the “strongest buffer against stress”. It has been shown that this cohesion starts to unravel when commanders are not honest about the conditions that need to be suffered in order to persevere or do not acknowledge the unreasonableness of unavoidable demands.

Particularly critical to the ability of the U.S. military to persevere, is the JTF Commander's responsibility to identify and monitor “high stress” units and individuals. These are individuals or units who have had a highly stressful recent deployment or experienced death of unit members; have demonstrated a higher than usual arrest rate or more frequent visits to the outpatient medical facility; have higher absences without leave, requests for transfer; homicidal threats, or suicide attempts. If needed and called for by mental health professionals, the JTF commander should initiate job rotation, enforced rest and relaxation, and if indicated, an evacuation for psychiatric treatment, as specified in the Combat Stress Reduction directive.

The will of the troops to persevere would also be improved by ensuring the capability and time to communicate with home through phone and mail, to include email services.

Legitimacy

Sustain the legitimacy of the operation and of the host government, where applicable; projecting the perception of legality, morality, or rightness to other nations, non-government organizations, and foreign and domestic populations³¹

Implications for Psyche of Armed Forces: Not only does the MOOTW need to appear legitimate to other nations and foreign and domestic population, but the deployed troops also need to believe in the legitimacy of the operation for them to maintain a determination to perform to achieve this mission. The cultural alienation and resentment that the soldier feels for being separated from his family to fight for what he may perceive as a non-U.S. responsibility can create a deployment-induced depression.

An example of a seemingly unrelated direction that impacted the troops' perception of their legitimacy is the order that was issued in Somalia that male and female soldiers were to sleep in separate tents. This was perceived by the troops as a lack of the commanders' trust and an insult to the troops' professionalism. (Soldiers of the same sexes had shared tents in Desert Storm.) This order contributed to the general disillusionment of the troops in Somalia.³²

The difficulty of the U.S. military in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the operation – both externally and in the minds of the individual service members is exacerbated by the joint interagency approach of MOOTWs. As Andrew Natsios notes, “The military should know it is in good company in its discomfort. Anyone who believes

that all of the other actors...--diplomats, economists, and humanitarian relief managers—are prepared for these complex humanitarian emergencies would be mistaken. Most non-government organizations (NGOs) have limited experience working in wars, let alone in conditions approaching anarchy” with warlords ruling by brute cunning and force.³³ Not that this shared inexperience in MOOTW is any comfort to the U.S. military and their mental stability or will. The additional players and their inexperience merely add to the instability and the number of variables that could undo the legitimacy of the mission.

Implications for JTF Commander: The commander must strive to dispel the tensions associated with distrust by promoting an understanding between the U.S. armed forces and the other members of the MOOTW team of “friendlies”.

The legitimacy of the operation should be established and regularly emphasized by the Commander to his soldiers. If the Commander assumes that this legitimacy is self evident to the troops, he risks losing the legitimacy altogether. It has been shown by Army researchers that the regular expression by the command of the worthiness of the troops efforts, or ongoing “validation”, was largely absent from the Somalia, Croatian, and Haitian operations. This contributed to the fact that many of these troops became disillusioned and felt that their contributions during these deployments were not worth their discomfort and the separations from their families.³⁴

The need to maintain the legitimacy of the MOOTW also extends to the need to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the U.S. public. Ironically, the substantial mental demands inherent in future MOOTW are accompanied by a growing distaste of the American public for any form of casualty. A service member returned to his loved ones

with a mental infliction is likely to be viewed with the same distaste as if he had suffered a physical, battlefield impairment.³⁵

Conclusion

Past MOOTW experiences provide much information on the psychological impact of these deployments on the mental well being of individual service members and units. Some of the resulting recommendations for future commanders may appear to be no more than common sense that any military leader who rises to the rank of JTF commander should already know (i.e., keep your troops well fed and comfortable, ensure that they are aware of their mission). However, the competing command requirements of a MOOTW and the less than direct military action demands merit a reminder to the Commander of the importance of these basic requirements. "We've got to stop thinking of [service members] as being automatons who just take orders, to go off over the horizon and forget about the world until such time as they may come back."³⁶ Accordingly, good mental health preservation and psychological stress prevention procedures need to be consciously adopted by future JTF commanders, rather than being left to the trompe l'oeil of operational art.

Also to this end, future commanders would benefit from more emphasis in senior training courses on stress prevention and management techniques. As the Combat Stress Control directive recommends, senior service schools should include psychological stress studies in their curriculum – so that commanders can recognize symptoms of deployment related stress in themselves and their troops. Courses such as those taught by the Army War College on human performance, stress reduction and mental fitness such as "Men in Battle", would be good topics to cover at the other War Colleges at least as an optional

elective.³⁷ It would also be beneficial for future commanders if individual stress management/executive wellness were given a higher priority for instruction for War College attendees. This would improve the future commander's understanding of potential stress factors and facilitate his ability to diagnosis the decline of mental well being – both in himself and in his troops.

All Service members are finding that they need to employ unfamiliar skills during MOOTW deployments – such as the “approachable, understanding, and tactful manner” prescribed for peacekeepers.³⁸ The Joint Commander may also need to dig deeper into his own leadership skill tool box to sustain troop mental health and to prevent anticipated stress factors from affecting his troops' will to perform their military functions. Through his understanding of potential stress factors, knowledge of stress prevention techniques, and the use of superior communication skills, the JTF commander of future MOOTW will be able to preserve the psychological well being of the U.S. military's most valuable asset – its service members.

Endnotes

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² Note: "Stressors" is a word used in military medical literature to refer to stress factors.

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⁵ Kirkland, Halverson, and Bliese, Parameters

⁶ Joint Pub 3-07, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War, 16 June 1995

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¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Spielberg, Steven, Saving Private Ryan, Dreamworks Pictures, Released July 24, 1998

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¹⁶ Department of Defense Directive Number 6490.5, "Combat Stress Control (CSC) Programs", February 23, 1999

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Zinni, Anthony, Talk to CIA on Command and Control in Operation Restore Hope, Naval War College Tape

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²⁸ Joint Pub 3-07, "Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War"

²⁹ Kirkland, Halverson, Bliese, Parameters

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ Joint Pub 3-07, "Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War"

³² Kirkland, Halverson, and Bliese, Parameters

³³ Natsios, Andrew S., Parameters

³⁴ Kirkland, Halverson, and Bliese, Parameters

³⁵ Note: The American public's reaction to the Gulf War Illness can be used to exemplify this distaste for non-battlefield impairments in returning troops.

³⁶ Gilbert, Douglas J, "Force Protection Covers All Aspects of Troop Health", June 23, 1998, Armed Forces Press Service, <http://www.dtic.mil/afps/news/9806231.html> (9 April, 1999)

³⁷ Gatrell, Col, professor at Army War College, Carlisle, PA, Telephone conversation and personal email

³⁸ Joint Pub 3-07.3, as quoted in Allard, Kenneth, Somali Operations: Lessons Learned, 1996, p 71

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